STENDHAL AND AMERICA

BY

JAMES FRED MARSHALL

A. B., Indiana University, 1937
A. M., University of Illinois, 1939

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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STENDHAL AND AMERICA

One of the most cosmopolitan of French writers, Stendhal drew his inspiration from many foreign sources. Activities outside France always aroused his interest. His many visits to foreign countries are ample proof of the fact that here was no narrowly nationalistic mind. Stendhal's indebtedness to Italy is such a commonplace that it needs no discussion. The land beyond the Alps always remained the land of his predilection. It supplied inspiration for many of his works, and the Italian civilization seemed to him the finest that had ever blossomed anywhere in the world. His love for Italy went so far as to cause him to deny temporarily his French origin, and to arouse a desire to be known as a citizen of Milan. Miss Doris Gunnell, in her *Stendhal et l'Angleterre*,[1] has made an exhaustive study of Stendhal's relations with the country beyond the Channel. Alternately attracted and revolted by the English way of life, he never lost his interest in English affairs. England ranks second to Italy in the importance of the influence it effected upon his thought. Not so obvious, however, is the influence of the United States. Although Stendhal never visited the American republic and had only intermittent and brief relations with any citizens of that country, throughout his works, particularly in those of his maturity, repeated references to the United States appear.

Stendhal's many paradoxes and contradictions seemed quite puzzling when this study was first undertaken. When his observations were placed in proper chronological order, however, and studied in relation to influences at work on him at the time, the mystery solved itself, at least in part, and it was possible to see a definite relationship of cause and effect proceeding in a comparatively logical fashion. His opinions of American republicanism can be comprehended only when studied chronologically. It was the political system of the United States that Stendhal found most interesting; in fact, that country eventually became a symbol of republicanism in Stendhal's mind.

1. D. Gunnell, *Stendhal et l'Angleterre*, (Paris: Bosse, 1909).

Before 1814 however, the republic across the Atlantic seems rarely to have entered his consciousness. Many of his later opinions, nevertheless, had their origin in various forces at work during this period. Stendhal considered himself an ardent republican during the Revolution. As he himself confessed, this attitude was mainly an expression of protest against his family, who counted themselves aristocrats. The precocious hatred he felt for his father and for monarchy was matched by an equally precocious hatred for his preceptor, the abbé Raillanne, and for religion.

Monarchy and religion symbolized restraining influences, causes of *ennui,* bent on disturbing his "chasse au bonheur." These republican and anticlerical convictions were intensified by the instruction the young Stendhal received in the École centrale of Grenoble, where he was exposed to the teachings of Destutt de Tracy and the other *idéologues,* the heirs of the *philosophes* of the eighteenth century. This instruction was in large part responsible for the creation of an early interest in the writings of Condillac, Helvétius and Cabanis. Their influence may be noted in the republican ideals of Stendhal's works of the first years of the nineteenth century, principally the *Théâtre* and the *Pensées.*

Stendhal's republican convictions involved him in a minor way in some desultory effort on Moreau's behalf, after Napoleon's discovery of the Moreau conspiracy. The general's fate greatly interested Stendhal, and there can be no doubt that he frowned upon Napoleon's steps toward absolutism. As the French Republic vanished, one may note Stendhal's belief in the republican ideals of the French Revolution expressed in the fleeting admiration for the American political system implied in his comparison of Moreau to Washington.

The leaders of this ineffective "conspiracy" to aid Moreau were Stendhal's friends, Fortuné Mante and Joseph Rey, who also intensified his interest in the writings of Destutt de Tracy. December 31, 1804, Stendhal began a concentrated

study of the works of the leader of the *idéologues*, who, it is generally conceded, had the greatest positive influence of any of his contemporaries upon the author of *Le Rouge et le Noir*. For many years, Stendhal remained a devoted disciple of Destutt de Tracy.

In 1805 and 1806, Stendhal considered migrating to Louisiana. It was at this period that he had his most intimate connections with any Americans, his cousins from the former French colony, Armand Allard Duplantier and his son Fergus Duplantier, then in France. Stendhal apparently counted on their aid in making his fortune, but nothing came of the plan. Was Stendhal activated only by a desire to antagonize his family; was the project a form of blackmail; did he change his mind about the desirability of going to Louisiana? The point is very obscure. Although his relations with his cousins, as far as we know, were quite cordial and he later remembered them in a friendly manner, we have advanced the theory that they failed to encourage his efforts and that a remark dated March 26, 1806 appearing in the *Journal* about the avarice and baseness of the American character was an expression of Stendhal's disappointment at the collapse of the scheme. At the same time, he derisively described the base, avaricious American character as a "beau fruit" of "le gouvernement le plus passable qui existe."

Moreover, his ironic comment on American civilization may be explained by a desire to rationalize his abandonment of his formerly intense republican convictions in order to accept favors from Napoleon's new régime. His grandfather had convinced him that it would be judicious to ingratiate himself once again with his relatives, the Daru family, prominent figures in the new Napoleonic government, whom he had alienated by his lack of gratitude for earlier efforts on his behalf. Eventually, they became reconciled with their cousin and from 1806 to 1814, thanks largely to the influence of the Darus, Stendhal served the Empire in increasingly important positions. This period he later described as the happiest of

his entire life.

During that time, there is no evidence to indicate that he ever gave more than a casual thought to the United States. In 1810 however, he made a will in which arrangements were made for a literary prize to be awarded every year. The funds to provide this award were to be invested in land in Scotland or the United States; the fund was to be administered in England, or in the United States, if Napoleon succeeded in defeating England. In spite of the fact that Stendhal owed his position to Napoleon and his autocratic rule, a great respect for the limited monarchy of Great Britain may be detected in Stendhal's writings of the last years of the Empire and the first few years of the Restoration.

With the advent of the Bourbons, Stendhal, under the impression that France was to have a constitutional monarchy similar to the English, welcomed their return. Eager to obtain a government post commensurate in importance with his former position, he intrigued with his friends, the Beugnots, for a diplomatic or consular post in Italy, but to no avail. He eventually left for Italy, which he had loved since his first visit there; in addition, he thus avoided the humiliation of having his present poverty contrasted with his former affluence as a functionary of the Napoleonic régime.

These cruel blows of fortune embittered Stendhal. The failure of the Bourbons to recognize him aroused an intense hatred for the Restoration, matched only by a hatred almost as intense for England, the country he had formerly admired so extravagantly and for which he still showed occasional moments of admiration. Nevertheless, England, the victor over Napoleon, and the new government of the Bourbons represented France's disgrace and the causes of his own personal difficulties. During the first years of the Restoration, Stendhal believed that a war between England and the United States was inevitable, and he took refuge in the thought that the former English colonies would defeat the mother country and would furthermore surpass her in every way. These

vindictive thoughts vanished however, when he finally realized that there was to be no war between the two countries.

Although he occasionally revealed some slight interest in the American political system from 1806 to 1817, during that period Stendhal believed a limited, constitutional monarchy to be the most desirable form of government.

In 1817 however, Stendhal's long devotion to Destutt de Tracy received new impetus with his discovery of Tracy's *Commentaire sur l'Esprit des lois de Montesquieu.* For several years, Stendhal considered this work the expression of his own political philosophy.

Written about ten years before this time, the manuscript of the *Commentaire* had been sent by its author, who did not dare attempt publication under the despotic rule of Napoleon, to Thomas Jefferson, who first published the work in an English translation in the United States. Jefferson had personal reasons for taking an interest in Tracy's work, which Chinard has appropriately termed the perfect expression of Jeffersonian democracy. The third President considered it an excellent refutation of Hamilton and the Federalists, who had often invoked Montesquieu to substantiate their arguments against the more liberal ideas promulgated by Jefferson.

Under the influence of the *Commentaire,* Stendhal became converted to a belief in the principles of American democracy, and from approximately 1817 to 1828, except for occasional brief lapses, he believed the American form of government to be superior to any other.

In what did the appeal of the *Commentaire* lie? We have concluded that it was principally because of Tracy's identification of happiness with liberty and with power. Need one comment on Stendhal's obsession with his "chasse au bonheur" and his cult of "l'énergie"? More than one example of Stendhal's use of the term "heureux" with the meaning of "libre" is to be encountered in his works of this period.

Tracy had stated his belief in a republican form of government, denying at the same time Montesquieu's statement that "la vertu républicaine" consisted of self-denial; Stendhal could never have approved of a republicanism based on asceticism. Tracy also believed that the debts of one régime should not be binding upon the following régime; Stendhal found this a convincing argument to use against payment of the indemnities levied by the victorious Allies after the Napoleonic wars. Believing religion a nefarious influence, Tracy had stated that peace, freedom, virtue and happiness thrived in direct proportion to the weakness of religious ideas in a country; Stendhal, one may be sure, agreed wholeheartedly with Tracy.

Tracy expressed his belief in a form of historical evolution as applied to government. According to him, nations went through three stages of development: 1. a primitive democracy, or else despotism, 2. aristocracy, 3. representative government. In his opinion, this was an inexorable process which nothing could halt. Stendhal adopted this concept, and later, even when he decided that the triumph of republicanism was not an attractive prospect, his belief in the inevitability of a universal victory of government patterned after the American system lingered.

From 1817 to 1820, Stendhal reiterates on numerous occasions his adherence to the political philosophy of Destutt de Tracy as expounded in the *Commentaire sur Montesquieu.* His high opinion of the American form of government reveals itself to best advantage in *Rome, Naples et Florence,* where it becomes clear that, under the impact of Tracy's work on Montesquieu, Stendhal had become so completely converted to a belief in representative government as practiced in the United States that political reform assumed paramount importance in his mind. The period 1817 to 1820 marks one of the high points of his esteem for the American political system. Even during this high tide of respect for American republicanism, other aspects of American life seemed deplor-

able to him. The paradox of American life, the contrast between the admirable form of government and the dreary character of most other elements of American civilization, puzzled Stendhal for many years.

His curiosity about the United States had been aroused sufficiently for him to consider making a trip to the United States in 1820, and one can only regret that the profits from the *Vie de Haydn,* with which he planned to finance the trip, were nonexistent, and that nothing came of his plans. Some American, whose identity remains a secret, had convinced him that life in the United States was quite inexpensive. It is very likely that Stendhal planned this trip, at least partly, in order to forget the unhappy outcome of his love affair with Méthilde Dembowski.

After the collapse of his plans, Stendhal's enthusiasm for the American political system began to wane somewhat. The *Edinburgh Review,* always one of Stendhal's primary sources of information, undoubtedly had much to do with this change of attitude. In January 1820, the magazine had published its article, "Statistical Annals of the United States," in which Sydney Smith had made his famous sneering remark about the lack of the refinements of civilization in the American republic. After 1820, Stendhal began gradually to conclude that the form of government under which one lived played only a very insignificant rôle in producing happiness, and that therefore Destutt de Tracy had been mistaken in his identification of happiness with liberty.

From 1821 to 1830, Stendhal spent most of his time in Paris, where he was often to be encountered in liberal salons of the era. The most important of these was the salon of Destutt de Tracy, where La Fayette was "le premier personnage." Stendhal never lost his awesome admiration for the general, and La Fayette's influence, plus that of the host, Tracy, accounts for a revival of republican enthusiasm.

Because of the intimate connections of Tracy and La Fayette with Jefferson, Stendhal had become interested in the

great Virginian when he discovered the *Commentaire sur Montesquieu.* Stendhal's attitude toward Washington varied, ranging from great respect to later casual dismissal of Washington as a bore. Benjamin Franklin was one of Stendhal's early enthusiasms and continued to obtain his approbation all his life.

Having come to the conclusion that not even political liberty existed in the United States, Stendhal lost all interest in the American form of government about 1828. In his opinion, the tyranny of monarchy had been replaced by a tyranny of the mob and of public opinion. Henceforth, his disillusionment with American civilization was complete. Because of its promise of furthering freedom and happiness, the American political system had been the only facet of American life that he had ever found praiseworthy; now it was found to be worse in its effects than the political system of Metternich.

Although Stendhal continued to appear in Destutt de Tracy's salon, the *idéologue* ceased to exert his former great influence on him about this same time; furthermore, Stendhal's friend, Victor Jacquemont, returned in 1828 from his visit to the United States, filled with an intense aversion for everything American. Undoubtedly, he communicated his impressions to Stendhal, who must have been swayed by the vehemence of his friend's observations. In 1829, Basil Hall published his *Travels in North America,* from which Stendhal derived one of his ideas about the United States,—the necessity of paying court to the lower classes of society, rather than to a king or bishop,—which seemed to him henceforth the dominant characteristic of American republicanism.

Henceforth, he had nothing but disdain for the American republic. Although his appointment as French consul, first at Trieste, and later at Civita Vecchia, was not exactly to his liking, he presumably found that the post offered sufficient security to make it worth retaining. Furthermore, he had friends in Louis-Philippe's government, and, although he

despised the King, one may conclude that Stendhal had no desire to see further political agitation with the possibility of overthrow of the existing régime. Republicanism had become a disturbing element in his life. It is undeniable that his opposition to American republicanism became more intense after 1830. In *Lucien Leuwen,* the *Mémoires d'un touriste* and *La Chartreuse de Parme,* the necessity of paying court to the artisans and tradesmen of the United States recurs again and again to extinguish any ardor he might feel for representative government. By 1842, he was completely out of sympathy with everything connected with the United States.

Just as Destutt de Tracy had awakened Stendhal's sympathy for the American political system for a period, another *idéologue,* Volney, early aroused his antipathy for other phases of American life. Tracy's *Commentaire sur l'Esprit des lois de Montesquieu* and Volney's *Tableau du climat et du sol des États-Unis* were the two main sources of Stendhal's information about the United States.

Although the incident is not mentioned in Volney's work, the *idéologue* had become involved during his sojourn in the United States in an altercation with Joseph Priestley over religion, which had nation-wide repercussions in the United States. Stendhal does not refer specifically to Volney's unfortunate experience in the United States, but, sharing Volney's anti-religious opinions, he rarely expressed anything but disapproval for the austere Puritanism of American Protestants; sadness and Puritanism became synonymous in his mind.

For many years, Stendhal revealed an interest in the American Indians, although it was the bizarre and fantastic elements of Indian life that he found most diverting. It was from Volney's account of the Indians that he derived one of the basic points of his esthetic doctrine. Portraying the Indians in a very realistic and unflattering manner, Volney had advanced the theory that the ancient Greeks had been on

the same cultural level as the American Indians of that time; ergo, the ancient Greeks were no more worthy of emulation than the degraded Indians of North America. Stendhal found this a very effective argument to use against the Classicists.

From Morris Birkbeck, Stendhal obtained some of his opinions of American religion. Stendhal approved of the American separation of church and state that Birkbeck had described, but certain fanatical religious sects flourishing then in the United States portrayed by Birkbeck amazed Stendhal. He seized also on a fortuitous remark of Birkbeck criticizing the bad taste of the marble columns of the Capitol in Washington as an instance of the lack of art in the United States. His belief that the arts could never flourish in the United States was fortified also by the American experiences in 1822 of the English actor, Charles Mathews, whose vilification as a monster of immorality by a bigoted New York clergyman approached the incredible. Stendhal could never conceive of art in a democratic society; that was one of the reasons for his eventual rejection of all that was American.

Except for a sporadic recognition of some cultural activity, Stendhal always considered the United States an intellectual and artistic vacuum. American life was almost wholly unattractive. For example, love languished and excessive morality, with its inevitable companion, boredom, destroyed any possible happiness. In spite of their severe religion, the Americans, in reality, worshipped only dollars, and the grossest sort of materialism dominated them. The gay, sensuous, slave-holding aristocrats of the South were more to his taste than the stern, cold Puritans of the North; with this attitude he could look with indifference upon slavery.

Eventually, Stendhal concluded that there was some necessary and strange connection between the lower-class republicanism, sad Protestantism and crass commercial spirit of the United States. This horrible combination of forces was destined to spread over the entire world, destroying art and

love, and disseminating its tiresomeness everywhere. American republicanism caused him to approve of monarchy; American Protestantism made him prefer Catholicism; the bourgeois, commercial and materialistic spirit of the United States, by its denial of all the values that Stendhal held dear, served to strengthen these monarchical and Catholic sympathies.

In any evaluation of Stendhal's conclusions, it is necessary to recall that he never visited the United States. He was personally acquainted, however, with some of the most distinguished visitors to the United States, including the celebrated La Fayette.

Stendhal's judgments were therefore based primarily on the observations of others. He was familiar with a great number of works describing many different elements of American life. Ranging from the enthusiasm of Destutt de Tracy's *Commentaire sur Montesquieu* to the snobbery of Basil Hall's *Travels in North America,* these works comprise a list impressive in both quality and quantity. The names of such men as Franklin, Volney, Lewis and Clark, Morris Birkbeck, Washington Irving, John Heckewelder and Tocqueville reveal the variety and catholicity of his interests and sources of information. Without having actually visited the United States, Stendhal could consider himself well informed about American life.

During much of his lifetime, he was interested in the United States as a symbol of republicanism. Stendhal was eager to observe the effects of representative government as practiced in the United States. When it had seemed to promise happiness, he was an ardent believer in representative government; as soon as he realized that there was no necessary connection between these two concepts, he abandoned his republican ideals. Eventually he felt that American republicanism was destructive of happiness, as he understood the term.

His reactions were therefore largely those one might anticipate in a person of his temperament and inclinations. Stendhal was one of the least religious of men; it would have been astonishing indeed to discover any but a contemptuous attitude toward the Puritanism of the Americans. More concerned with the enjoyment of old cultures than with the rise of new, raw civilizations, Stendhal felt little attraction for the pioneer spirit of that day with its neglect of the arts, literature and science and its emphasis on the development of the frontier. The United States had been settled principally by men of the poorer classes of Europe; Stendhal relished the company of cultivated persons with the leisure necessary to acquire varied and stimulating interests. He felt nothing but distaste for those unfortunate but tiresome people lacking the time, money and background for the gracious things of life.

Although Stendhal had access to varied sources of information, he stressed comparatively few aspects of American life and institutions. Independent and original at all times, he selected at will from the observations of others and adapted what he chose to his own individual philosophy. In this eclectic and adaptive process, Stendhal was rarely objective. Furthermore, he was considering a rapidly evolving civilization, and many of his statements are now invalidated. Nevertheless, his views on America are of interest in themselves, as the impressions of a keen and vigorous mind, and they are worthy of notice in their relation to the general pattern and development of Stendhal's thought.

VITA

James Fred Marshall was born August 15, 1912, in Indianapolis, Indiana. A graduate of Shortridge High School in Indianapolis, he received the A. B. degree "with highest honors" from Indiana University in 1937. The A. M. degree was granted in 1939 by the University of Illinois, where from 1937 to 1942, he was an assistant in French, and for one year in Spanish also, and where he continued his graduate work in French, Spanish and German. The years 1942 to 1946 were spent in the Army of the United States, from which he returned in 1946 to the University of Illinois as an assistant in French. He is a member of the following honorary societies: Phi Beta Kappa, Phi Eta Sigma, Pi Delta Phi and Sigma Delta Pi. While a graduate student at the University of Illinois, he attended the courses of Professors Aron, Carnahan, Hamilton, Jackson, Michaud, Oliver, Peckham, Van Horne and Will. To each he wishes to express his gratitude, especially to Professor Joseph F. Jackson, under whose direction this study was prepared.